

Teaching Statement, 2020-2021

A Remarkable Year: Multimodal archival research and in-person research in hybrid WRIT courses

Rob Gilmore

Surprising Challenges

Of everything this academic year, the biggest surprise for me was the comparison between this socially distanced, masked, and limited contact academic year and the emergency on-line only experience of Spring quarter 2020. While I expected challenges, I did not expect more of them this year than last—students seemed to face more difficulty at times; my own approaches to (and assumptions about) my pedagogy felt more strained; and the collective exhaustion of students, faculty, staff, and, indeed, everyone on campus (and off) was in clear evidence.

But this description both isn't entirely fair and does not offer insight into what was a truly remarkable and challenging year. There were certainly challenges—to the students, to me, to the university—but there were also transformative movements and experiences. The constraints of life on campus also encouraged some of the best student reflection I've seen in WRIT courses, the challenges of "doing" school in a pandemic seemed to breed a surprising amount of creativity and diversity of thought, and I had students with more diversity in backgrounds and experiences than ever before who offered new perspectives on established topics and conversations. Students may have struggled some to finish work this year, but I also saw some wonderfully interesting work, including perhaps the best individual research project I've ever seen in a WRIT class. In short, it was a remarkable year.

And it's a year that that has shown me that things will never be the same, and that, in fact, I cannot allow things to be the same, at least

in my teaching. As such, I want to explore the concepts I usually cover in this annual teaching reflection, but I want to start pushing towards new approaches and ideas. I'll go through the general experience of teaching in a hybrid modality here, how it helped meet but also frustrated my goals for the year, how I understand my current approaches to WRIT classes, and, finally, where I want to go. I saw a lot of good this last year, but I also see room for a lot of development, especially in the realm of sensitive and supportive pedagogical approaches that will encourage me to more directly engage with important considerations in higher education and beyond.

Hybrid Modality

In setting goals for the year last fall, I didn't yet have a clear picture of what my teaching would look like given the uncertainty of the pandemic. As such, I set some modest goals, while acknowledging that most things would be influenced by the "professional and logistic realities of the coming year." The main goal, then, was to be as flexible as possible, and, along with the rest of my colleagues, to "promote our 'chops' in being nimble in terms of our pedagogy, as I believe we can be a model for the rest of the campus in responding to these challenges." Faculty were given the freedom to choose which modality they would work in, and I opted to teach hybrid courses (one meeting per week, asynchronous work the rest of the week).

This shift in modality offered a number of challenges. Most of my classes, and especially my xx33 courses, emphasized different kinds of in class work: I often had students go out of campus to do field work and go into the Special Collections reading room to work with physical documents (only about 10% of the archive is digitized). The fully online quarter of spring 2020 of course made this difficult, but I was concerned with returning to some of the work that required in-person experience (particularly on-campus). Hearing

from colleagues in fall 2020 that students seemed frustrated with the restrictions on their living spaces and interactions—moving from distanced classrooms to dorm rooms with very few third spaces—I decided to have students use in-person, in-class time to interact with each other and the physical space of campus as much as possible. Informally, I tried to design elements to my in-person meetings that couldn't be effectively replicated online.

Some of my assignments lent themselves well to this approach: the historic photograph assignment I've used for several years was an obvious fit, as were some smaller field work activities (writing in various parts of campus). I added a handful of additional activities (small videos in the Tik-Tok genre, for instance), and made sure to use other assignments (like an observation of a campus space) that likewise gave students more experiences than they seemed to be having in their other classes or even social settings. I'm not sure the extent to which I succeeded in offering something they didn't have elsewhere, but students regularly commented positively in their reflections on the activities that asked them to get up and go somewhere.

Going forward, I think there's some opportunities to take this general approach even further, to reconsider (possibly dramatically) how I use in-class time and the kinds of experiential and rhetorical dimensions of activities and contact with and between students.

Initial Class Goals and Course Reflection

For the most part, I believe I followed through on this main idea of flexibility that I discussed above, but I'd also like to cover the smaller goals that I set for my courses.

1122

In 1122, I wanted to revisit the advertising

unit and create a new assignment: an ad parody. After discussion with my colleague Heather Martin, I built a new sequence of assignments for the unit, culminating in a mini-portfolio (a concept I adapted from my xx33 courses). The ad parody was the final assignment in the sequence that involved students choosing modern ads, discussing their ad's rhetorical function, imitating the ad (in their own brief videos), analyzing the brand identity (ethos) of the ad in an essay, and then critiquing the brand identity in the parody. The addition of the short videos (simple completion assignments that mimicked the tone of the ad they were analyzing) and the parody offered some solid chances to explore additional and different rhetorical dimensions of advertising, even as previous activities—like visiting the archives to look at vintage cigarette ads—were curtailed by health and safety rules. Expanding what was a couple of smaller assignments to a whole unit paid off—a number of students in their reflections pointed to the advertising unit in particular as a high point of the class.

Overall, though, 1122 did feel like the biggest challenge of the year. This was the case for a few reasons, but the biggest ones lay in the hybrid modality and some policy and resources choices in Special Collections. First, the hybrid modality presented more challenges in 1122 for me than in xx33, as the latter already benefited from a host of assignments and activities that relied on in-person activities and benefited from online material (most of which I generated the previous spring). Since my 1122 classes had previously focused a lot on reading and discussion, with particular focus on reading strategies, I felt that material I already had wasn't as suited to the heavy in-person focus I was trying to cultivate. I generated a number of smaller activities that used campus space and small group work, which helped, but the theme of Ethos and Identification, though still strong, felt like one that called for

constant adaptation throughout the term.

The other challenge resulted from important conversations between library staff and Native American faculty. In December, I was invited to a meeting between library staff, faculty who used the Edward Curtis archival materials for instructional purposes, and Native American faculty (primary from Anthropology). After a wide ranging and rich discussion of Curtis, his legacy, representation of Native lives and culture, and other related issues, library staff agreed to suspend instructional use of the Edward Curtis materials in Special Collections until further conversations could be held regarding their appropriate and respectful use. I readily agreed with and supported the decision. For the past few years, I had included a multi-week unit in 1122 about representation and identity, and the ethical responsibilities of an audience in viewing materials that offered different perspectives on Native American lives and culture. I had found it to be a productive and provocative unit for my predominantly white students, and one that was often mentioned as an important look at how those students view, understand, and write about others. Since the Curtis materials in DU's collection were unavailable for instructional purposes, and to respect the reasons for that being the case, I chose not to include the Curtis unit in my 1122. I expanded the other units—on ethos and place and advertising—to allow for more engagement in those aspects of ethos and identification. Both units were of interest to students, and the activities seemed to generate positive reflection for students. For instance, I once again invited author Connor Coyne to discuss his experiences living in Flint, Michigan, and students thoroughly enjoyed the opportunity to discuss course concepts with an author of one of their readings. Still, I do value the discussions of representation and diversity that the Curtis unit brought to the class, and I look forward to ethically and respectfully work with those materials and issues again in the future.

All in all, 1122 had its challenges, though I do think that some aspects of this year will be useful going forward: the use of the mini-portfolio concepts from my xx33 classes was particularly useful, as it offered students a chance to synthesize and reflect on work from an entire unit, which seemed to generate positive results and insight from students. Further, a number of students praised the class as a welcome change of pace from their other online and in-person work, and I had a number of students sign up for my 1133 classes in the spring. Going forward, I hope to revisit core ideas of my 1122 approach in order to move the Ethos and Identification forward to important discussions of inclusivity and identity (I discuss that below).

1133—Winter and Spring

Compared to 1122, my 1133 classes were easier to adapt to the hybrid modality. Some of this came from having taught the classes in the online spring: I had produced a large amount of material that framed what I usually do in-person for an online experience. This, paired with the relatively easy access to the digitized Special Collections material, allowed me and my students to more easily navigate the out-of-class, asynchronous work. For in-person work, I was able to bring back a number of the “campus space” themed activities from the past, including the historic photograph field work assignment, the observation of a public space assignment, and the general mini-portfolio approach that I had first piloted in Winter 2020. As such, I felt like I was drawing on very strong, established material and adapting it to the new and challenging circumstances we were all facing. This meant that I always felt confident in the material and organization of the class, and I think it provided a lot of opportunities for in-depth thinking and writing for my students.

In fact, I think I may have seen some of the most impressive reflective writing from my

students that I've seen since weekly reflections became a staple of my classes a few weeks ago. Students routinely commented on both the engagement with campus space and student life (the theme of the course) and the role of health and safety protocols in shaping experiences of college and campus spaces. Students were then able to draw connections between unique conditions in their daily lives and in historical periods in DU's history. These kinds of connections led to perhaps the single best research project and digital exhibit I've seen in my classes: a project on DU during the 1918 influenza pandemic. The student that produced that project did extensive work with our own librarians and archivists, and was also connected to librarians at Denver Public Library. She produced an original and sweeping piece that included new information about DU and Denver at the time with a skilled and creative comparison to conditions in 2021. All in all, it was an inspiring piece of student research that has encouraged me to think about coordinating and collaborating with librarians and professionals at other cultural institutions going forward. I nominated the student for the Director's award, and I was delighted to discover that this student's parent had attended DU and also worked with arts and humanities librarian Peggy Keeran. It was a nice bit of legacy connection that underscored how valuable these projects—and our amazing librarians—are for student learning and thinking.

One aspect of 1133 that felt less successful was trying to meet my modest goals set out at the beginning of the year. I had hoped to return to and re-invigorate peer review in 1133, but while I did re-establish the connection with the Writing Center and their Facilitated Peer Reviews for the first major unit (and to great success, both in the Winter and Spring), I don't feel that I yet have a sense for how the whole class can be more focused on the social and collaborative nature of writing and research that I was looking for.

Still, the courses in both winter and spring felt successful to me, and I look forward to returning to that peer review and collaborative goal for next year.

1733—Returning to Physical Exhibits

My 1733 class this spring was invigorated and transformed by a chance meeting. Late in Winter quarter, I ran into Madison Sussmann, manager of exhibits and artworks in AAC, and stopped to chat. Madison had been a graduate student assistant when my 1133 classes had first done physical exhibits for their final projects in Spring 2018, and she's now been promoted to her current position. She mentioned that, in spite of the health restrictions, physical exhibits could very much be a possibility for my spring research classes. We set up a meeting and talked it over, and this surprise came to re-shape my 1733 class entirely.

Like my 1133 class, I'd produced a lot of written content for the online spring 2020 1733 class, and I was able to use a lot of that material and adapt it for the hybrid course. I began the class with the historic photo assignment, and then brought back the Jewish Consumptives' Relief Society (JCRS) patient files activity, and worked with Peggy Keeran and Beck Collection Curator Jeanne Abrams to design a visual literacy follow-up assignment that focused on tuberculosis health and safety posters from the first half of the 20th century. This new assignment paired well with the JCRS activity in preparing students to work with and making meaning from the multimodal materials so prevalent in archives. Following these "orientation" activities, students dove into their own research projects that aimed to tell "stories from the archives."

But I also felt that the return of physical exhibits would be an opportunity to emphasize the in-person work that I'd so wanted to be a focal point for all of my

classes, so Madison and I created a sequence of in-class activities to have students fully engage in a semi-authentic exhibit design and installation process (semi-authentic only because of the constraints of the class and term structure). Early in their research projects, students identified preliminary artifacts to serve as an entry point both for their work and for audience engagement with it. After submitting digital images to Madison, students learned in-class how to mount visual elements on the wall according to ADA and Smithsonian standard sight lines and parameters. The next week, students submitted rough drafts of labels for their visual artifacts, then mounted them on the wall for markup. For a significant portion of the class, students commented on each other's labels and marked directly on the card-stock drafts, taking into account both content and appearance (standing while reading brings a new element to the reader experience of an exhibit label). Students then finalized their drafts and, in the last class period, mounted the exhibit labels alongside their artifacts. The whole process was mentioned several times in student reflections: seeing something physical on the wall was a big motivator and encouraged students to dive further into their research to produce the final project, a digital exhibit. The physical exhibit is currently on the wall in AAC 376 (usually an open study room), and will be up until October.

Overall, 1733 was a surprise and a success, and many students in final reflections commented on how enjoyable and engaging the class had been in spite of the health and safety restrictions. While I didn't have a chance to engage directly with the goal I'd stated at the beginning of the year—to focus more on narrative and recovering voices—students nevertheless did explore those concepts, which suggests that I can re-visit those ideas going forward.

Moving Forward, Integrating Ideas

While I think that, overall, my teaching was successful—surprisingly so, in some cases—this year, it's worth noting that there were plenty of challenges. I've noted a few above, but there were others: students struggled to stay focused and complete work, to stay engaged, especially in the spring. While I had several very solid projects throughout the year, I saw a number of projects that struggled to meet the basic requirements of the assignment (and the direct correlation between those projects and the most common topic, "Greek Life at DU!", hardly seems a coincidence). Further, I often worried that my course design (lots of completion grades, for instance) lead to overly-lenient grading. I feel confident that my engagement with and feedback on student work was productive (and students suggested as much in reflections), and I want to make sure that I remain sensitive to student learning goals, but I think that student struggles and challenges call for more than me just being "understanding" or "lenient about deadlines." What's clear to me is that trauma—and trauma-informed pedagogy—is something to place more at the center of my work. Engaging with what students have experienced and, in many cases, what student are always experiencing, is important for me in following through on a promise made this past year (and every year, really) to students that I would support them and help them meet their educational goals as best I could.

Beyond that sensitivity to trauma is a need for me to engage more with the important work of inclusivity and anti-racism. My classes, and especially my archives based courses, have been informed by feminist research methods for some time, and recovering voices and stories has been a major consideration for student work for several years. But I have not made those feminist research methods as much a focal point of discussion and work in the class as I could have—they've informed the work, and students have read about them, but I have only rarely explicitly identified

them as key to our thinking. Further, I have tried to follow some of the fantastic inclusive pedagogy guidelines and concepts highlighted by our colleagues in the Office of Teaching and Learning, but I believe I can and should do better. I should offer challenging, maybe even provocative, engagement for my students between what we see in the archives of a predominately white institution and the stories that remain untold, both in terms of marginalized members of the DU community and of the Denver community more broadly. I need to make conversations of inequality more explicit in my teaching, and to encourage students to think critically both about their experiences and the experiences of past DU students. In short, I want to create a class where students will not include archival materials depicting white students dressing as Native Americans for a homecoming activity (circa 1950s) without careful contextualization and, frankly, criticism (this happened in one student project this spring). To prepare students to engage more fully with these issues is important.

Maybe more important to start is the need to educate myself. I'm not yet sure how to have these conversations with students, so my main goal for this year is to expand my own thinking. To learn how to engage with the intersections of these ideas myself. I want to find the intersection of trauma-informed pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy, archives based pedagogy, and feminist research theory, and I want that intersection to guide the thinking and writing both for my students in my classes and for my own writing (in my teaching, service, and scholarship). What's frustrating now is how little I know about each of these elements, but I do feel that pursuing that intersection is vital for my engagement with students and their learning. This year, I think, is the time to make these ideas a focal point of my thinking.